WELFARE

A guide to handling camelids

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Victoria Barrett, a senior consultant at Camelidynamics, offers an insight into a tried and tested method of handling alpacas and llamas. By employing these techniques, OVs should be able to treat camelids safely and effectively.

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Victoria Barrett is a senior consultant at Camelidynamics. She has trained extensively with Camelidynamics founder Marty McGee Bennett and is contracted to APHA to deliver handling training for the safe and effective management of alpacas for TB testing. Sixty OVs and technicians have been trained by Victoria to date.

Vets are more likely than ever to meet camelids in their work, be this for routine medical husbandry, the development of herd health plans or medical emergencies. Since the introduction of The Tuberculosis (Deer and Camelid) (England) Order 2014, OVs are increasingly involved in testing for bovine tuberculosis. Bovine TB is a worry to camelid owners because an outbreak could cause significant practical and financial repercussions, particularly with current compensation awards inadequately reflecting true losses. TB in the alpaca industry is however a relatively small problem; mortality from parasitism, for example, is a far bigger issue.

Camelids are a unique family of animals and to work efficiently with them, it is helpful to have some insight into their nature and behaviour. Camelidynamics is grounded in applied behaviour science, a popular approach for handling and training alpacas and llamas. The aim is to introduce a set of skills to the handler that will make every animal easier to work with. The approach is based on an understanding of behaviours and stresses the importance of balance and leverage, as opposed to restraint and force; the key steps can be remembered as 'A, B, C'.

Antecedent

It makes sense to consider facility set-up first. If the client doesn't have appropriate handling pens and is unable to get the animals in before you arrive, then a satisfactory outcome is unlikely. Camelids are herd animals and will be distressed if penned alone. If you are uncomfortable working with more than one animal in a pen, the camelid's companions should be penned alongside.

Behaviour

Unwanted camelid movement can be created in a pen purely by standing on the animals escape route (this is not the route to the pen's gate, but rather to the space in the pen that offers the animal the greatest distance from the handler, and therefore the greatest sense of safety). Not standing in front of the alpaca, or too close to it, and angling your shoulders away from the animal will allow it to feel that the escape route is always available. Counter-intuitively, this creates the best environment for it to stand still.

Consequence

The animal should stand still and is likely to repeat this behaviour given the same set of circumstances, so catching it will be easier.

Catching Camelids Safely

One way catching can be achieved is using the "midline catch". Using body position as described above, the alpaca should be moved into a position where it is aligned with the side of the pen with its head in a corner. The aim is to move smoothly and steadily from a position behind the eye to place the back of a hand on the lower neck. Then slide this hand up to behind the ears while stepping in to bring the other hand under the chin, placing the forefinger and thumb into the groove of the lower jaw. This gives you a "bracelet" hold, which helps to steady the animal.

Some animals are routinely cornered and grabbed around the neck to achieve husbandry tasks, so are unlikely to overcome their flight response easily. Using a catch rope and wand allows the animal to be caught without trapping it and without encroaching on its flight zone. This should encourage the animal to stand still, at which point the vet can move closer, maintaining an awareness of their body position and approach. Once the rope is around the neck, there will be enhanced leverage to help influence the animal's balance and behaviour. All of this can be achieved while maintaining what feels like a safe distance to the alpaca or llama.

The rope is not for holding the animal still; holding it tight will have the same effect as shutting off the escape route – it will trigger the flight instinct. The pen is there to contain the animal so you don't need to. The rope can be slack.

Bracelet hold

Catch pen

Maintaining the animal in balance is the final consideration. With your arm around the neck, the likelihood is that an alpaca or llama will be pulled off balance by a handler trying to maintain his or her own balance, creating a sense of panic in the animal. An animal in balance will carry its body weight 67 percent over the front and 33 percent over the rear legs with the head held in line over the neck and shoulders.

Using these techniques, an examination can be completed without causing undue stress; intramuscular injections can be given in the triceps muscle and subcutaneous injections in the angle of the neck and shoulder – this should be

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achieved by leaning over the animal so any movement is into you and not off the needle. It is possible to blood test an alpaca or llama while still offering an "escape route" by crouching (not kneeling as that would prevent quick movement if required).

A special note about Llamas

Llamas pose a particular challenge due to their size and strength, though the lack of a dense fleece can make examination easier. If a llama is unable to stand still for procedures such as brushing or shearing, it is unlikely that it will tolerate veterinary intervention. The techniques described above, if used well, will give the animal the greatest opportunity to stand independently, but there should be a low threshold of tolerance for withdrawing.

A halter is usually required to influence balance in a llama

Handling aids

effectively. A well-designed halter should be safe, comfortable and effective as a tool to communicate with the camelid.

Camelids are semi-obligate nasal breathers, so a halter that slips forward on the nose bone will compress the nasal cartilage and compromise the airway, causing the animal to panic. To ensure this does not happen, the crown piece must be secured tightly behind the ears. For a halter to be comfortable, it must offer enough room in the nose band for an animal to eat and ruminate. A well-fitting halter fits the head, not the nose.

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There may be circumstances where examination isn't possible and alternative plans need to be made. There is little to be gained from chasing a frightened animal around a field or risking injury to person or camelid. In these cases, rescheduling may be necessary to allow for facility preparation, gaining the assistance of more experienced handlers or to have a discussion with the owner about sedation. ■